

Global Anarchism and Syndicalism

Theory, History, Resistance

Lucien van der Walt

2016

Contents

A preliminary note on terms	3
What is ‘Anarchism’ Anyway?	4
Not just ‘Anti-State’	4
Clarity of analysis	5
Movement myths versus movement realities	6
Understanding the ideas and debates	7
Anarchist Histories: Bakunin and the Working Class	8
Influences and antecedents	9
Core Ideas of Anarchism	9
Proletarian and class internationalism	10
Sharp focus, better picture	10
Global anarchism: provincialising Spain	10
Influence and labour movements	11
Popular imprints and politics	12
A global approach and its revelations	12
Resistance, rehearsals, revolutions: class and national struggles	13
The ‘big three’ revolutions	15
Debates and Strategic Divisions	15
‘Insurrectionist’ anarchism	16
Flaws and failings	17
‘Mass’ anarchism	17
Daily struggles and syndicalism	18
CONCLUSION	18

ABSTRACT: The discussion below is a lightly edited transcription of a talk given by the author at the Ay Carmela, Rua das Carmelitas, in São Paulo, Brazil, on 2 November 2010. This article provides a global perspective on the history and theory of anarchism and syndicalism, arguing against views that treat anarchism as simple ‘anti-statism’ or a natural human ‘impulse’, in favour of the argument that the current is a socialist, working class tradition dating to the International Workingmen’s Association (the ‘First International’), 1864–1877. An international movement in intent, conception and membership from the start, it drew on a range of modernist, rationalist socialist ideas, and developed a powerful base in many regions of the world by the 1940s. Spanish anarchism was undoubtedly important, as was the anarchist Spanish Revolution of 1936–1939, but Spain provided but one of a series of mass-based, influential anarchist and syndicalist movements. Barcelona was only one in a chain of red-and-black anarchist and syndicalist strongholds, and the Spanish Revolution only one of a number of major rebellions, revolutionary rehearsals and actual social revolutions in which anarchism/ syndicalism played a decisive role. Although public attention was drawn by the spectacular actions of the movement’s marginal ‘insurrectionist’ wing, it was the ‘mass’ anarchist approach – based on patient mass organising and education – that predominated. The movement’s immersion in mass movements – especially through syndicalism, peasant and civil rights struggles, fights against racism and women’s oppression, and anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles – can also only be properly appreciated from a global perspective – one in which the movement’s rich history in the colonial and postcolonial world is placed centre-stage. The real history of the movement should not be confused with the mythological, propagandistic history of anarchism that sections of the movement subsequently promoted, centred on claims that ‘anarchism’ existed across all human history, was ‘natural’ etc.

KEYWORDS: anarchism, syndicalism, labour, anti-colonialism, Bakunin, Kropotkin, class struggle, radicalism, anti-globalisation, global labour history

A preliminary note on terms

Please note that when I use the term ‘syndicalism’, here I am using it in the *English* sense of specifically meaning *revolutionary* syndicalism and/ or *anarcho*-syndicalism, not in the Romance language sense of meaning unions in general. And when I just say ‘anarchism’, I am usually including ‘syndicalism’ (both anarcho- and revolutionary syndicalism) because it’s a *variant* of anarchism. Revolutionary and anarcho-syndicalism, are forms of anarchist trade unionism, rooted in the anarchist tradition, constituting *strategies* for anarchism, rather than a separate ideology or movement.

One of the key issues that must be addressed for a project like this – a project which looks at anarchism and seeks to do so in a truly global and planetary way, rather than through a narrow focus on parts of Europe (which is how the history of anarchism is often done) – is that you have to think very carefully how you define the subject. So, if we are to discuss ‘anarchism,’ we need to have a clear definition, and this is where we come up against some serious problems in the existing literature.

What is ‘Anarchism’ Anyway?

The issue of where you draw the boundary around ‘anarchism’ is very important. It is important to the *analysis* and the research: I am not talking about drawing an arbitrary boundary, just to be exclusive for its own sake.

The problem with a loose definition is that you do not have a clear subject of study; inclusion and exclusion become vague, arbitrary and often absurd. There is, in English, a well-known survey of anarchism by Peter Marshall. This is an important and insightful book. But it defines anarchism very loosely: basically to be anarchist is to be against ‘authority’, especially the ‘authority’ of the state. ‘Authority’ is not really defined here, and also, as I will show later, just being against the state, for whatever reason, by no means provides a reasonable basis to define something or someone as ‘anarchist’.

Using this approach, we find Marshall including in his survey of anarchism the neo-liberal Margaret Thatcher, as a so-called ‘anarcho-capitalist’, because she opposed state intervention and welfare,¹ as well as the Marxist-Leninist Che Guevara, because Guevara was mildly [Read more...] critical of some of the bureaucratisation of the Castro regime, fostered a ‘libertarian spirit’, and played a ‘creative’ role in the 1960s. But these were people who embraced the state, in principle, even if they were against certain state *forms*.

And remember, Thatcher played a key role in breaking the British welfare state and trade unions, in driving down wages and closing industries, and in shifting income to the rich. For her, being against the state merely meant being against the interventions of the state in the free market. She was perfectly happy to use the state to beat up protestors, strikers, to invade the Falklands. As for Guevara, we are talking here about a man who admired Joseph Stalin, who worked with the Russian dictatorship, who helped erect a one-party state with a secret police, in Cuba. So, yes, he was mildly critical of some elements of the Castro regime, but it’s a regime that he, of course, helped construct and helped run, a regime he never repudiated.

Not just ‘Anti-State’

But if we just define anarchism as being ‘against’ the state and against ‘imposed political authority’ like Marshall, and then use the notion of being ‘against’ the state in a very loose and vague way (and here, it obviously does not even entail wanting the *abolition* of the state, but just some *changes* in the state), then it is logical to include Guevara and Thatcher.

But if, by the same token, we can logically have a study of anarchism, like that of Marshall on anarchism, that is comfortable including neo-liberals and Marxist- Leninists as part of the story anarchism, then we have a logical *problem*.

Specifically, if we define anarchism loosely, as mere anti-statism, or maybe as a vague commitment to ‘freedom’ of ‘the individual’, then it becomes very difficult to consistently distinguish it from other ideologies – not least, from neo-liberalism and Marxism-Leninism. And if we cannot

¹ Marshall’s subsequent attempts to exclude ‘anarcho-capitalists’ from the camp of the real ‘anarchists’ – as not paying adequate attention to equality and as not being approved of by most ‘anarchists’ – are inconsistent with his own definition of anarchism as a current opposed to ‘external government and the State’ and ‘imposed political authority, hierarchy and domination’, since neither equality nor approval are part of this definition, but that is an issue for another paper: see P. Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism* (Fontana Press 1992), pp3, 565.

distinguish anarchism from neo-liberalism and Marxism-Leninism, then it is pretty difficult to demonstrate that such a current as anarchism even exists.

Analytically, the problem goes even further: if we follow the line of argument that Marshall makes, where anarchism is effectively reduced to opposition to the state, then we must be consistent, not arbitrary.

If we define anarchism just as being against the state, there is no reason why Karl Marx or Joseph Stalin or Mao Tse Tung cannot be included, because they all said, quite explicitly, that the state must 'wither away' in the future, as part of the final emancipation of humankind. Guevara may have made an appearance in Marshall's book, but there is no reason to exclude Stalin or Mao. That is arbitrary. If Guevara can fit, there is no reason Stalin and Mao cannot.

But to define anarchism in such a way that it can embrace Stalin or Mao seems to me highly problematic – not to add that this is an approach that elides all sorts of crucial issues. For example, figures like Stalin and Mao were associated with massive repression, a one-party state and so on. I don't think that it is unreasonable to suggest that historic anarchism has been in favour of pluralism, debate and basic political and civil rights. But if we define it in a way that can include Stalin, then surely we cannot claim that historic anarchism has been in favour of pluralism, debate and basic political and civil rights.

Similarly, neo-liberals are sceptical of the state, and they believe the power of the state must be reduced as much as possible, whether it's in the economy as a whole, or in economic transactions between contracting individuals. So, if to be anarchist is just to be against the state, then there is no particular reason not to include, for instance, J.S. Mill, von Mises or von Hayek or Milton Friedman, or even General Pinochet in Chile, into the anarchist tradition, because they are anti-statist in the sense that they distrust state intervention, and view the free market as emancipatory, efficient and natural.

Clarity of analysis

But to include Thatcher – even if we stop at Mill and the rest – must mean that certain elements can reasonably be taken as part of historic anarchism, like opposition to capitalism, wage systems, and private property, must also thereby be treated as irrelevant to, as inessential to, historic anarchism. So, anarchism here becomes something compatible with one-party states (through Stalin) and free markets (through Thatcher), and simultaneously with increased *and* reduced state intervention, and with one party states and multi-party states, being against 'authority' but fine with trampling on basic rights.

Throughout history, you'll find some people who are against the state in some way or other, but to treat them all as 'anarchists' leads us to straight into an analytical dead end.

If anarchism is just anti-statism, we can and must include as 'anarchists' both Stalin and Pinochet. But if we can include Stalin and Pinochet, Marxist-Leninists and neo-liberals, dictators of left and right, and a whole host of others, then if there is anything evidently or specifically 'anarchist' anywhere, it's not clear what it might be.

We can treat all of those people as 'anarchists,' but if we do, the very notion that something called 'anarchism' even exists becomes nonsensical, because it becomes impossible to actually delineate anarchism from anything else. And once that is done, the very possibility or utility of

actually studying and understanding anarchism in the first place is destroyed by the project of trying to do so.

If we use the argument that ‘anarchism’ means pretty much anything that is against the state, then we will certainly find anarchists everywhere. Marshall is perfectly consistent when he says that the first ‘anarchist’ was Adam, in the Garden of Eden, when he didn’t listen to God. But the problem is that if anarchism is universal in human history, then it cannot be explained by reference to changing *social conditions*. This would mean, in effect, that anarchism is in some way a *natural* part of humanity. But if that is the case, then there is another serious analytical problem: if anarchism is natural to people, then we cannot understand much of human history, which undoubtedly involves the ongoing expansion of oppression, exploitation, and of the power of an elite few over a working and poor majority.

Movement myths versus movement realities

Now, here we must grapple with another problem, which is that all political movements, all movements to change the world, *create* around *themselves* a set of myths. Anarchists also make their own myths: the argument that anarchism is somehow a universal feature of human society is one that some key *anarchists* have used in order to *legitimise* their embattled, controversial movement.

Making claims that anarchism is universal and steeped in the ages is a simple and easy way of deflecting claims that the movement is new, impossible or bizarre. It allows, for example, anarchists to claim an ancient and venerable lineage and a massive historical importance; and it ‘naturalises’ the movement. But it’s just not a *valid* claim, however politically *useful* it might seem to be.

We must therefore distinguish between certain anarchist myths, from the *actual* history of anarchism. So, to study anarchism we have to study anarchism, but *not* necessarily always in the way that the anarchists themselves have presented *themselves*. It is important to study *how* the anarchists created mythologies, but also important not accept those mythologies, regardless of whether some anarchists propagate those mythologies, or those mythologies recur in academic works.

Allow me to draw an analogy. Nationalists have usually developed a mythical and self-aggrandising history of their nation, presented as reaching back into deep antiquity, with an unchanging culture, a shared history, common food, dress, territory, language and so on. Nationalists have then inserted themselves at the true bearers of this history. Very often, these claims are simply, demonstrably not true; we can recognise these as myths, with a political purpose.

Analysing these as myths is important, because it tells us something about how the *nationalists* view themselves, how their ideas are expressed and so on. But it would be fundamentally mistaken to take nationalists’ views of the nation’s history literally, since these views are usually profoundly flawed, misleading and selective.

Likewise, it is important to study *how* anarchist ideologues like Piotr Kropotkin and Rudolph Rocker (to give two examples) created mythical histories of ‘anarchism’, *why* they did so, and what *effects* this has had on anarchism and anarchists, and on the historiography of anarchism and anarchists.

Nationalists, we know, make myths, and we do not take these at face value, as self-evidently true. But we *examine* the myths as *myths*.

But anarchists *also* make myths, and these should also not be taken at face value. Rather we must *examine* the myths.

What gets included in the myths is very interesting, since it tells us something about the anarchists that invent them. For example, Kropotkin was quite explicit in suggesting that anarchism has deep roots in both Asian and European cultures: by doing this he deliberately presented anarchism as *universal*, rejecting Eurocentrism. Rocker stressed the links between the anarchists and the first modern working-class movement, citing similarities between the Chartists in Britain in the 1840s, and visionary early labour leaders like Robert Owen: this shows his stress on trade unionism, the modern working-class and on anarchism's links to other socialists.

But it would surely be a mistake to literally follow Kropotkin in claiming that Lao Tze in ancient China, or Zeno in ancient Greece, were literally anarchists, or to suggest, as Rocker almost does, that the Owenites were syndicalists.

The point is that we must understand *the movement that makes the myths*, rather than take *the myths the movement* makes as literally true. To understand anarchism, as a movement, we should understand what it says about itself, but we need to understand that this is a *movement*, which emerged at a particular point, at which it could then *speak* about *itself*, using various strategies.

Let me stress here, and this is important, that not every anarchist has bought into these mythical histories, or that the anarchists even have one unified set of mythical histories.

There is a strong tradition in anarchism that was never involved in creating these mythical histories: Mikhail Bakunin, for example, never made such claims, while writers like Georges Fontenis were very critical of such myths. On the other hand, there *were* many myths and no real unified synthesis of them: different parts of the movement had different myths. For example, the Korean anarchist Ha Ki Rak claimed that the Dong Hak peasant war of 1894 in Korea was in many respects identical to the anarchist 1936 Spanish Revolution, a claim that is not found in Spanish anarchism.

Understanding the ideas and debates

Now, a last issue: if we define anarchism as anti-statism (or even as vaguely committed to 'freedom') and then, logically enough, must include under the anarchist banner such radically different people as Thatcher, Guevara and Bakunin, and so on, then our discussion of anarchism as a set of ideas must *always* be profoundly *superficial* because it is trying to understand ideas that are totally different to each other – and that do not belong together in any way.

That is, we can only group these disparate figures *if* our discussions of anarchist theory are vague, and *if* we ignore the many points of deep *divergence* between these figures. But if the basis of grouping is flawed, the grouping is mistaken.

If, to put it another way, we claim that Thatcher, Guevara and Bakunin can all be seen as somehow part of one tradition, then we can only examine what they *share*. What this means is that we cannot take into account a wide range of issues on which they differ, such as capitalism and states, not to mention the very meaning of 'freedom' and 'anti-statism', not to mention even more complicated issues, of theory (for example, around social structure), of strategy (for

example, over vanguardism and one-party rule) and tactics (even issues as key as *how* anarchists should act).

With this sort of approach, the debates in the historical anarchist movement, its achievements, in theory and in praxis (in fact the most theory and politics of the movement itself), get lost. We end up with banal discussions that deal vaguely and superficially with many issues, and that entirely ignore a great deal more issues. So, a definition of anarchism as ‘anti-statism,’ cannot really say who is in anarchism and who is outside of anarchism; cannot really say what anarchism was and why it emerged; cannot really say what the anarchists did and why, and why they succeeded or failed; it cannot even say really, what the anarchists wanted and thought.

But there is an alternative approach that exists in the literature, which argues that anarchism emerged *at a specific point in history*, in the form of a *new* mass movement that was evident to observers as a new movement – a revolutionary movement. Then we can look at what that movement sought, and what its historical trajectory entailed. Then we can also start to understand the *historical conditions* – intellectual and social – in which this movement emerged, and so, *explain* its rise and fall. That is, we can understand its *history* as a *social force* – through social analysis. And we can also examine the evolution, that is, the *history*, of its ideas, and we can identify an anarchist lineage of movements, and an anarchist canon of writers.

If we historicise anarchism, we can delineate it, and *explain* it and *understand* it.

Anarchist Histories: Bakunin and the Working Class

The historical record shows very clearly that a specific, self-defined, consciously anarchist movement, only and first, emerged in the First International around Mikhail Bakunin and the International Alliance of Socialist Democracy. That puts it in the period from 1864, around 150 years ago – not in the Garden of Eden and not in the Ancient world.

This is *not* to say that there were not people who had ideas that anticipated or prefigured parts of anarchism or that there were not other libertarian currents, before or after this moment. But it is to argue, to insist, that in order to understand what anarchism was and is, we have to use a *historical* approach. A historical approach points us to the First International. That locates anarchism, as a consequence, as rooted in the working class and socialist movement. That also places it firmly in a tradition of radical thought going back to the 1800s.

And if we look here – to the First International – then a good way to start to grapple with its key ideas is to look at the writings of Bakunin, his theories, and also those of Piotr Kropotkin, the other great luminary of the emergent anarchist movement.

Now, please let me stress that this approach does *not* claim that these two, Bakunin and Kropotkin, had a comprehensive worldview that was unchanging and that emerged perfectly formed. It does not claim that anything and everything that they said was a perfect revelation, against which all claims of truth have to be judged or that they invented anarchism.

It's not saying anything like that that. Rather, it's arguing, simply, that their ideas and writings are, by any reasonable measure, *foundational* and *representative* texts of the anarchist movement.

Influences and antecedents

Certainly, the anarchist movement, which emerged in the First International, was *influenced*, very influenced indeed, by the libertarian socialism of P.J. Proudhon, who was writing from the 1830s – and in particular, by his stress on self-management, decentralisation and anti-statism. But influence does not mean something is *identical*. The anarchist current was very *different* to Proudhon's because (as I will show in its strategy and its overall outlook) it engaged in some serious ruptures with Proudhon's approach. It was not Proudhonism but it was influenced by it.

Similarly, the new 'anarchist' movement was influenced by Karl Marx, who was writing from the 1840s – and in particular by the economic theories of Karl Marx, not his *politics* but his economics. It used Marxist economics, but in a critical way, in a way that engaged and actually transcended and developed those economics, in a way that, I would suggest, even seems to solve some of the problems in Marxist economics (for example, it develops a better price theory, which takes into account the impact of power relations).

It was not Marxism but it was influenced by it. Influence is not identity.

And last, the anarchist ideas were only possible against the backdrop of a massive and *global* ferment in radical thought, driven by massive class struggles, from the sixteen hundreds. They were part of the ferment of modern ideas of science and freedom, which we can give many labels, including that of 'the Enlightenment'. And when I speak of 'the Enlightenment', let me state to avoid any misunderstanding: 'the Enlightenment' was the product of the Atlantic world, involving Europe, but also the Americas and Africa; it was also part of the great cycle of class and national and intellectual rebellions that shook four continents in this period.

Core Ideas of Anarchism

Now, I'm assuming people have an understanding of what anarchism is, but perhaps I should take a step back and clarify: if we look at it [anarchism] there have been three or four main fundamentals of the movement. These include opposition to relations of domination between human beings, including those expressed in the government (or the state) and those expressed in capitalism, but also including those expressed in all sorts of other ways among human beings (such as national oppression). These positions were expressed clearly in the works of Bakunin and Kropotkin and the movement that was born in the First International, and no reasonable definition of anarchism can view these as inessential to the anarchist project.

Liberals stress the importance of individual freedom and so forth, and Marxists stress the importance of abolishing capitalism, but it is anarchism that took these two parts, and put them together in a way that none of these others really managed to do, with a radical *libertarian socialism*.

So, anarchism is a movement that is against hierarchy and that is against exploitation, and it is a movement that (in other words) links the struggle for individual freedom to the struggle against capitalism and the state. With this theoretical position it has been able to develop a critique of a range of other forms of domination, for example imperialism and national oppression, and to also point out the dangers of opposing capitalism by using, for example, dictatorial states.

In terms of its strategy, the overall strategy anarchism emphasises is the need to build a movement *from below* of the *popular classes* (the broad working class and the peasantry), which can

fight against all these inequities and create a new and better world. It aims at *revolution* from below, the forcible occupation of the workplaces and the defeat of the state machinery in a decisive confrontation, conflict. This is quite different to Proudhon, who envisaged a slow process of cooperatives being built up, slowly replacing capitalism.

Proletarian and class internationalism

One of the key things in this regard, in regard to this revolutionary perspective and stress on class struggle, is that what defines anarchism (contrary to, say, nationalism) is a thoroughgoing internationalism – a literal and principled internationalism, literally ‘Workers of the World Unite!’ as a vision, as a practice, and as a way of thinking.

This means a class-based politics, which sees the popular classes worldwide as having more in common with each other *no matter their country*, than they can ever really have with the political and economic elites *within* their home countries.

Sharp focus, better picture

Now, armed with a historicised definition and understanding of anarchism and its offshoots of revolutionary and anarcho-syndicalism, and an idea of its basic principles and its key figures, we can start to analyse anarchism *globally*, and look at it as a *worldwide* movement. This has major implications for how we understand anarchism’s history, its impact and its achievements.

In one way, we have ‘narrowed’ the definition of anarchism, but this very narrowing allows us to have a *clearer* focus, just like with a camera: you can see better, despite a *sharper* focus.

So, then, we can work in a *systematic* way to understand this anarchist movement, as it *emerged* and as it *operated globally*, and we can start to really understand the *patterns* in the movement. So if we are looking at the movement from the 1860s onwards, and we are taking a global view, there are some important changes in our mindset that must arise, that must follow.

Global anarchism: provincialising Spain

Now, one of the key issue that arises is that very often, when we think of the history of anarchism, we focus heavily on Spain and on Spanish anarchism. And of course, the story of Spanish anarchism is central to the story of anarchism and syndicalism worldwide.

But when we look globally we find that the story of Spain is not so unique, we find that Spanish anarchism is just one ‘*province*’ in a worldwide anarchist ‘*country*’. And, in fact, by some measures (for example if we look at the influence of anarchism in *trade unions*) we find movements elsewhere that are *bigger* than that of Spain.

So, this isn’t to say Spain is not important, but that Spain is *part* of a larger anarchist *world* and that Barcelona is just one of a whole *chain* of red-and-black cities.

To Spain’s great fiery rose of anarchism, Barcelona, we must add other red-and-black cities like Buenos Aires, Chicago, Guangzhou, Glasgow, Havana, Mexico City, Montevideo, Santos, Tokyo – all cities with a major anarchist or syndicalist influence. And then the second tier red-and-black cities, with substantial movements (but not as large as those just mentioned), like Alexandria, Auckland, Johannesburg.

The point, here, is that when you understand anarchism clearly and you take a global view, you start to see that this history needs to be brought back into many other histories: the histories of unions, peasant struggles, of civil rights and national liberation struggles are all histories that the anarchists and syndicalists shaped, and histories that *cannot* be understood adequately unless we look at *how* these histories intersect with anarchist and syndicalist history, globally.

Influence and labour movements

Now, looking at international *patterns* is one way to understand and assimilate all this information. So, let us take one trend, which is the role of anarchists (including syndicalists) in founding and pioneering trade union movements. And let's start in the colonial and postcolonial world. Isabelo De Los Reyes, who founded the first trade union in the Philippines in 1902, was deeply influenced by the Spanish anarchists. In China, it was the anarchists who formed the first modern trade unions from 1914 onwards, and in Guangzhou and Hunan the unions were led by anarchists far into the 1920s.

In South Africa the first trade union for black Africans was set up by revolutionary syndicalists in 1917. Similarly in Ireland the first industrial unions were led by people identified with the IWW (Industrial Workers of the World, formed in the USA in 1905) tradition of revolutionary syndicalism in 1909. And these unions were successes, they won victories, they organised and educated people, and at times they grew explosively: in Ireland, by 1920, the revolutionary syndicalist- influenced unions had grown from 5,000 to 120,000.

This points to another major pattern in the history of the anarchist and syndicalist movement, which was its role in organising massive strikes and class struggles. I will illustrate this by referring here to some important strikes: Parma, Italy, in 1907; Paris, France, in 1910; Auckland, New Zealand, in 1913.

Banners carried by syndicalists in the 1913 mass strike in Auckland, by members of the then-radical New Zealand Federation of Labour (known as the 'Red Feds'), displayed the slogan 'If blood be the price of your cursed wealth, Good God, we have paid in full'. This came straight from a poem widely distributed by the IWW internationally, having featured in its radical press and songs transported by migrants, which starts 'We have fed you all for a thousand years, and you hail us still unfed ...' This poem tried to explain how working and poor people have built the world we have, but have been excluded from its benefits. And the text on the banner, 'If blood be the price of your cursed wealth ...' formulated, in a powerful way, the claim that the wealth of the ruling class is paid for by the blood of the working class and peasantry – and that these popular classes have paid heavily, have paid more than enough, and had a radical claim for deep change.

And to continue: in Mexico City, anarcho-syndicalists led massive strikes in 1915 and 1916; in Johannesburg, South Africa, in 1918, syndicalists worked with black African nationalists to try and organise a general strike; in Chicago, the United States, in 1919, syndicalists like William Foster played a leading role in a massive strike by steel workers. In Japan, too, the anarchists were very important in the trade unions, and published the first paper dealing specifically with labour, called 'Labour Movement'. Anarchist-led syndicalist unions in Portugal included a range of groups not normally thought of as union members, such as artists and tenants, and this enabled a leading role in actions such as a major tenants' strike against high rent in Lisbon in 1921.

To draw together this outline of the movement's union role, and its role in workplace struggles, I want to list some countries where anarchists or syndicalists at one stage or another were the main force in the labour movement: Argentina,

Brazil, Chile, Cuba, France, Mexico, the Netherlands, Peru, Portugal, and Uruguay. And of course Spain, although there they were always challenged by a large social democratic rival union, the UGT or General Union of Workers, that often matched the anarchist CNT or National Confederation of Labour in numbers and workplace influence. Other countries where they were large and influential, but not hegemonic, in labour, include Australia, Bolivia, Bulgaria, China, Ecuador, Egypt, El Salvador, Guatemala, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Mozambique, New Zealand, Paraguay, Poland, South Africa and the United States.

That's an outline covering just a few years, and a few places, just a narrow slice of a giant history; that is not the whole history of the movement by any means, a movement that went back into the 1860s and continues today, and that has had many major organisations and achievements in that 150-year time span.

Popular imprints and politics

Now, the point of this section is simply to underline the popular imprint of the movement, to show that the movement of Bakunin and Kropotkin was important in workplaces, was important for millions of people, was able to win real material gains, whether in the form of higher wages or in the form of lower rents; also, that it was a movement that organised in the neighbourhoods and territories of the working class and of the peasantry.

And this was not a movement that only dealt with issues like wages and rents. It was actively involved in political issues, in struggles around rights, in struggles over power. Let us take the IWW in Australia. This was an important current in the larger union movement, and opposed the prevailing trends of social democratic reformism and of overt white racism.

When Australia, as part of the British Empire, entered into the First World War in 1914 against the German-led bloc, the IWW stood firm to its internationalist, anti-militarist and anti-imperialist positions. It stood against the tide. The leadership of the IWW was tried for treason, and the organisation was made illegal. Some people paint the revolutionary and anarcho-syndicalist unions as solely focussed on wages and conditions; this is just not true. In Australia, to give one example, the movement raised basic issues around war and the power of the state, and asked the simple questions: Whose war? In whose interests? Why should working class youth kill each other, for the benefit of elites that do not sacrifice or risk life or limb, yet gain from the bloodshed of others?

A global approach and its revelations

Now, another key feature of the movement, not least in the period from the 1890s to the 1930s, was the role of networks of people, of newspapers, and of the linkages created by worker migrations.

A lot of the history of anarchism and syndicalism is written in the mode of national case studies, that is, for example, the history of *Cuban* anarchism, of *Brazilian* anarchism and so on.

This is useful, but it also actually blinds us to important processes in the movement, and so, to important parts of its history.

There are many processes and connections which take place across state borders, and despite the existence of state borders, but these don't get captured by a national framework of analysis. And we need to look at these *transnational* processes and connections, so that we can better understand what happens *within* specific countries, and so that we can also examine processes that operate *transnationally* and that cannot be understood within national frameworks.

I'm just going to give one example: Lala Har Dayal, a brilliant South Asian (that is, Indian) scholar, born in Delhi, won a scholarship to Oxford University in Britain. Increasingly politicised, he moved to India, then to France, Algeria and Martinique, before ending up in California in the United States in 1911. Associated increasingly with anarchist ideas, he joined the IWW and served as secretary of its San Francisco branch, and also set up a Bakunin Institute (he also had a job at Stanford University.)

Meanwhile, always committed to Indian independence and radical social change, Dayal made contact with US-based South Asian communities, mainly Sikhs from the Punjab region of India, and in 1913 co-founded and played a central role in the radical Ghadar Party in California. 'Ghadar' means 'mutiny', referencing an uprising, a rebellion.

The Ghadar party platform, and ideas, had elements of anarchism and elements of Indian nationalism. It developed as a global formation, building an international network that included Canada, Japan, parts of Africa (notably Kenya), Afghanistan. In India its key connections were in the Punjab, and in 1915 the party launched an armed uprising in India against British rule. By this time Dayal had lost his job, and, arrested in the United States, had fled into exile in Europe.

The 1915 rising was repressed and defeated, but in the years that followed the party rebuilt itself and remained active into the 1940s, not least in Kenya. And it retained throughout an anarchist imprint.

The point is that a story like this is a *global* story, and it locates anarchism and syndicalism firmly in international migrations, transnational networks and worldwide movements. It is not easy to grasp a story like this through a national framework that divides the world into discrete movements in the United States, in India, in Kenya.

Resistance, rehearsals, revolutions: class and national struggles

Another pattern that I am going to point to is the role of anarchists and syndicalists in moving, in some cases, from resistance to attempting to remake society in a fundamental way, that is, to making revolution.

What I have mentioned, as struggles so far, were about building mass movements and campaigns. These were about resistance and they were about fighting back, but there were times when the popular classes, with and through the anarchists and syndicalists actually took control of society and remade it. In this sense, they moved from being classes in an existing class system, to creators of a system without classes. Some of these experiences were partial, and some far more thoroughgoing. Let's start with some of the more limited attempts at recreating the world.

An early example was in Macedonia, in the struggle for independence from the Ottoman Empire, the remnant of which is today's Turkey. Anarchists were leading figures in this struggle and in 1903 a number of the key areas were taken over by militias in which anarchists were key fig-

ures, and there were attempts to create radical ‘communes’. Then in Mexico 1911, Ricardo Flores Magón’s movement, in Baja California, attempted to create a revolutionary anarchist territory.

Some other struggles were perhaps more modest than these, yet still radical and still able to start making some real changes in society. In Ireland, during the Irish war of independence, syndicalist-influenced unions were involved in taking over workplaces and running them. One, a creamery, had the slogan ‘We make butter not profit’.

There were also of course the Italian factory occupations movement of 1920, centred in the metal industry of Turin. This was in a context where there was a powerful revolutionary syndicalist movement and an important anarchist influence at the working class base. Many of these workers were not, in fact, in the important Italian Syndicalist Union, then almost one million strong, but they were influenced by the large anarchist and syndicalist current of the time.

At least in the English-speaking world, much of the story about these events has been retroactively written around the figure of Antonio Gramsci, later a famous Marxist. He has been presented as the intellectual leader of the movement. But this is simply not true. In fact Antonio Gramsci’s newspaper, *New Order*, was selling over 5,000 copies every two weeks, at a time that the anarchist Errico Malatesta’s anarchist *New Humanity* was selling 50,000 *a day*. And the editor of the Gramsci group’s paper was a follower of the anarchist Kropotkin, while the early Gramsci was far closer to anarchism and syndicalism than to many Marxists of the time.

Now, I’m going to look at *actual revolutions* that anarchists made, because all these things I have looked at so far should be, I think, be seen more as *rehearsals*, as *revolutionary rehearsals*. In terms of anarchist revolutions, I am talking about events that in terms of scale, in terms of depth, in terms of the number of people involved, and in the amount of time that they lasted, were quite distinctive, were qualitatively different.

I am sure many here will have heard of the anarchist revolution associated with the forces around figures like Nestor Makhno in the Ukraine from 1917–1921. This involved a vast territory, with democratic and participatory system of councils and assemblies, for workers, peasants and soldiers, and various efforts at self- management. It was also, and this is worth remembering, deeply entangled with the struggle for independence for the Ukraine from Austria, Germany and Russia. And for the anarchists an independent Ukraine would have to be a revolutionary, anarchist society.

Less well known was the revolution that took place on the Manchurian and Korean borderlands. In 1929, Korean anarchists including militants from the Korean Anarchist Federation and anarchists like Kim Jwa-Jim (who led a large part of the Korean Independence Army) organised a revolutionary society, rather similar in key respects to that seen ten years earlier in the Ukraine. The parallels do not stop there either. This revolution was also deeply linked to an independence struggle, in this case against Japanese imperialism. Almost three million Koreans were in Manchuria, which was at the time in substantial areas outside the control of the Japanese empire and also largely outside of the control of Chinese warlords and Chinese state authorities.

So, in this territory for three years, in Shinmin, anarchists made a revolution that was in many ways the same as that we saw in Ukraine. It included institutions like collective production, libertarian education and a fairly free social order based on worker and peasant councils and so forth.

And of course, Spain from 1936–1939, was also very important indeed, incredibly radical. The point is that the Spanish revolution *was* very important but wasn’t the first or the only anarchist revolution. It was the *third* in a period of around twenty years. Certainly in much of the literature,

including on the left, the impression is generally created of ‘Spanish exceptionalism’: that is, that only in Spain was there a big anarchist and syndicalist movement and that only in Spain was there a revolution.

But in fact some of the questions faced by the Spanish anarchists (for example whether to join the government) had *already* been posed elsewhere. Indeed in Korea a section of anarchists joined the Korean government-in-exile, and after independence in 1945, a wing of the movement ran in state elections, and some anarchists had seats in government.

The ‘big three’ revolutions

Which of the ‘big three’ revolutions should be seen as the biggest?

It depends what we use as measurement. If we are talking about complete control of an area, that is, the full realisation of popular self-governance through councils and self-management and so on, then both Ukraine and Korea were ‘bigger’ than Spain, where the revolutionary forces co-existed in the Republican zone with a capitalist state. But if we are talking of numbers of people involved, or the number of self-managed collectives, then it’s probably Spain that was the ‘biggest’, in that there were more collectives than Korea, than Ukraine.

Part of the difficulty for the movements in both Ukraine and Korea was the situation of ongoing war: for both of them this posed the difficulty of creating sustainable and stable structures. In contrast, for much of say, Catalonia, in Spain, the territory was defended and enemy incursions were slow and steady – as opposed to a situation of rapid land seizures by the enemy, followed by rapid expulsions of the enemy by anarchist forces, as was the case in Ukraine.

These points, in fact, help us understand better the reality of the earlier anarchist revolution by Koreans and Korean anarchists but largely outside of Korea itself. We need to bear in mind that for East Asia large-scale war did not start in 1939 with the Second World War but went back to the 1920s. And the anarchist territory created from 1929–1931 was facing, on the one side, pressures from the Soviet Union, which was arming Korean Marxist communists (who waged incessant attacks on the zone), on the other, Chinese forces, and on the third, a very determined and powerful Japanese Imperial Army that was pushing through Korea and Manchuria and into China.

Debates and Strategic Divisions

In the first part of this paper I spoke about *how* we define anarchism, and on this issue, the need to be *historical*; the second part has stressed the need to think *globally*. When this is done, it is important to identify the political *debates* within the anarchist and syndicalist movement. It’s easy enough to say you’re *against* capitalism or *against* domination or *against* the state, but what do you do *tomorrow*? What does this mean for concrete political activity, what does this mean in terms of strategy and tactics?

When we look historically, and when we look globally, at anarchism and syndicalism, its possible to identify two basic *strategic* approaches in anarchism.

‘Insurrectionist’ anarchism

The first one is *insurrectionist* anarchism. When I use this term, I am talking about a wing of the movement which says that reforms are *useless*, that all small improvements are useless, that if wages go up then prices go up etc., and you’re back where you started. That’s an example of this sort of thinking.

And politically, strategically, this leads straight to the conclusion that instead of fighting for reforms and small improvements, you must *only* fight for revolutions and do so *right now*.

Luigi Galleani, an Italian anarchist, was one of the key thinkers in this tradition, and he argued that anarchists must use the ‘tactics of corrosion’, by which he meant that, rather than supposedly ‘waste’ time with things around wages and rents, the anarchists must attack the ruling class directly and relentlessly *all the time*. And do so without *demands*, without *negotiations*, with instead the perspective of an immediate revolutionary assault.

You could, of course, approach do this by *telling* people ‘now, you must make a revolution’, that is, propaganda *of the word*. That is a ‘tactic of corrosion’, in that it undermines the system and the ruling class. But in practice the insurrectionist anarchist approach, which *cannot* really immerse itself in movements like unions, in struggles for lower rents, in demands for better laws, ends up with *one* main tactic of ‘corrosion’, a tactic that thus becomes a *strategy*.

And this is ‘propaganda by the deed’ in the form of direct, armed action against the ruling class: assassinations, ‘expropriations’ of banks, bombings.

Sometimes this links itself to some immediate struggles – for example, Galleanists undertook bombings in support of the fight against World War One – but these are interventions from *outside* the larger movements fighting for immediate changes, outside organisationally (as distinct cells), and politically and strategically (having no time for reforms).

This is ‘corrosion’ since it supposedly weakens the ruling class, but how is it *propaganda*? It is propaganda, claim the insurrectionists, in that these actions will supposedly inspire and awaken the masses, showing them their enemies and showing them they *can* fight these enemies, and showing them *how* to fight these enemies. The idea is basically that these actions will provoke massive spontaneous rebellions with directly revolutionary purposes i.e. sudden uprisings for the creation of anarchist society.

And these insurrectionist anarchists were not idle speech-makers, they were and are very committed to this politics. As one example, the first car bomb, many writers suggest, was placed by a Galleanist who bombed Wall Street in 1920, a man called Mario Buda. And you’ll find this movement existed not just around Galleani and his network, but also in Spain, Argentina, in Japan and elsewhere. In Japan, Kanno Sugako, an anarchist woman militant, was executed in 1911 for being part of a plot to kill the Japanese emperor.

Now, for many people, at first, insurrectionist anarchism, emerging from the 1880s, was very appealing, and it was actually widely defended even by anarchists who were *not* insurrectionists. Even Kropotkin thought it a good idea for a while. And the reputation for militant violence also *attracted* people to anarchism who were looking for alternatives, among them Chinese and Indian anti-imperialist youth. And insurrectionist anarchists certainly managed to assassinate a great many heads of state.

Flaws and failings

But there are many problems with insurrectionist anarchism, and these have ensured that most anarchists have remained in what has always been the main current in anarchism: mass anarchism, what I call *mass anarchism*.

Some of the problems with insurrectionist anarchism are obvious. First, it never came close to inspiring a revolution, partly because there was and is a certain passivity built into this model. People watch the armed attacks of the active insurrectionists, maybe admire them, and identify with them. But they don't join them. They *watch* them, they're spectators.

Secondly, as people like Malatesta noted, kings and emperors and presidents and big capitalists are easily replaced; the system is not really 'corroded' by a few assassinations, and the basic problem of most people *accepting* the need for these rulers is not really tackled by the insurrectionist model. After all, Wall Street still operates, nearly a century after Buda's bomb; in fact it was operating the very next day after Buda's bomb, and hasn't stopped since.

And last, of course, insurrectionist anarchists provided a pretext for massive crackdowns on labour and the left: just to go back to Japan in 1911, 26 anarchists were executed for treason against the emperor and most of them had nothing to do with insurrectionism: Kotoku Shusui, the key figure in Japanese anarchism, who promoted anarcho-syndicalism, was among the victims. The Red Scare repression in the United States in the late 1910s was directly precipitated by Galleianist and related bombings. And most victims of that repression were trade unionists and rights activists among ethnic and racial minorities, including in all these cases anarchists and syndicalists, but also the larger left, including the most moderate of socialists.

And of course anarchists are still tarred with this brush – of terrorists, bombers and killers – long after insurrectionists have ceased to be a significant force. This was made possible by the insurrectionists' actions, and continues to hinder anarchism even today.

'Mass' anarchism

The alternative approach, far more influential amongst anarchists (and certainly an approach that has demonstrably had a record of building up mass movements and a mass base for anarchism, of securing for anarchism many social 'vectors' into the popular classes) was *mass anarchism*.

I am talking here about a type of anarchism which says that *immediate* struggles, for small improvements, whether around wages, prices, transport, rent, land, discrimination, oppression, civil rights are where it is *possible* to build a mass revolutionary anarchist movement.

The key task, from this perspective, is for anarchists to *immerse* themselves in these immediate struggles, and in the movements that are built around these struggles – and within these spaces, to systematically *link* the daily struggles and concerns of the popular classes to the larger vision of the anarchists for radical social transformation.

How? It is possible to use these immediate struggles to build confidence, to clarify thinking, debate politics and to win the battle of ideas for anarchism; it is possible to build strong and participatory movements that directly lay the foundations for a new anarchist order. So for example, winning a higher wage will give a worker more confidence that he or she can really make a difference, can really matter. It builds confidence and motivation, and also provides more time

and space to think and fight. Someone who is not willing to stand up to their boss is not going to make a revolution that gets rid of all bosses. But in these immediate struggles themselves, people get opened to new ways of seeing the world, and open to the anarchist critique of domination and exploitation, and the anarchist explanation of where the problems come from and who the enemy is.

Daily struggles and syndicalism

There is nothing automatic here: there is an *opportunity* to win people to anarchism, and to win respect for anarchism, and to *show* the validity of anarchist ideas and methods (especially the use of direct action, and participatory movements).

At the same time, large and stable organisations get formed, which lay a basis for further struggles and victories, such as trade unions. Here too anarchists can play a key role in ensuring that such movements are open, democratic and participatory schools of bottom-up democracy, comradeship and equality.

The key thing, in short, is to use those immediate struggles that are happening today to start to lay the foundation of the future. It's what in *Black Flame* I describe as building a counterculture (that is, winning the battle of ideas among large numbers of people), and building a counter-power (that is, building mass movements that can both challenge the ruling class in the day-to-day reality, and eventually also *replace* it entirely with alternative structures to run society).

Now, this 'mass anarchism' was always, historically, the main wing of the movement, from the days of the First International onwards. One of the key points that needs to be made here is that the ideas later called 'syndicalist' were really a strategic elaboration of core anarchist ideas, and, more specifically, the 'mass anarchist' current. Syndicalism is part of mass anarchism.

And, crucially, the basic syndicalist approach was first developed by the anarchists of the First International; all of its elements can be found quite explicitly in the works of Bakunin, for example. What this means is that 'syndicalism' was, from the start, an intrinsic part of 'anarchism' – not an alternative, rival, parallel or similar current. The new *label* 'syndicalism' came to be used from the 1890s, for a variety of reasons, but the ideas developed from the late 1860s, thirty years earlier. And the first major unions with a 'syndicalist' approach emerged from the 1870s onwards, in Cuba, Mexico, Spain and the United States.

The syndicalists, as an expression of mass anarchism, spoke of the revolutionary role of syndicalist unions: to fight battles today, to educate the masses, and to organise, through the unions themselves, the very basis of self-managing the factories and other workplaces, the structures that would occupy and run the workplace itself.

CONCLUSION

Simply put, for this perspective, you still need a revolution, but there are no short-cuts. To have a revolution, you need the masses to make it; to get the masses, you need to go *to* the masses and fight alongside them, but *also* point them to a better future and to the methods and ideas needed to bring about that future.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Lucien van der Walt
Global Anarchism and Syndicalism
Theory, History, Resistance
2016

Retrieved on 11th October 2020 from <https://ithanarquista.wordpress.com/2016/06/29/lucien-van-der-walt-global-anarchism-and-syndicalism-theory-history-resistance/>
Published in *Anarchist Studies*, volume 24, number 1, pp. 85–106.

theanarchistlibrary.org